

EDITH SCAMMAN: AN APPRECIATION

A squawky 'Maineac' voice, 'thistles' in the old straw hat, and always radiating from her warmest of hearts the kindness and generosity of human nature at its very best: that is how a loving but candid biographer might characterize Edith Scamman — straight from the heart in turn as she would have wished. For years we used to laugh affectionately together about these first two items — for instance how, when she was with us in England in the summer of 1939 at the declaration of war on Hitler's Reich, her rendering of 'Keep the Home Fires Burning' involved a sudden ascent to a high-pitched shriek each time for the 'Burning' and 'Yearning'; and how, the year before that, the already old straw hat had been stood upon by a pony in Iceland which would not get off it for all my urging and belaboring until several of the 'thistles' had been scattered to the wind. It was Edith herself who was on that stolid pony, and our thoughtful Icelandic hosts later explained that they had chosen it 'for the old lady' as the only one in the region which would not only never bolt but would not even budge when belabored! And there, prolonging our happy botanical wanderings and investigations of the plant life of the sites of the Viking farmsteads whence had come the early colonists of Greenland and the American mainland, we ran so short of cash that we could not even afford our accustomed weekly luxury of a copy of *The Saturday Evening Post*.

Yet there was also somewhere in Edith Scamman's make-up an indomitable spirit of enterprise and even adventure — which sent her many times to the wilds of Alaska and remote parts of Costa Rica and elsewhere, even in later life, in search of new plants for which she had a keen eye. Though one did not know, and did not want to know, her age, she must have been well on in her seventies before she ceased her often exacting botanical collecting trips alone in distant lands, and to the end she did not give up her work in the Gray Herbarium, though it was always difficult to persuade her to publish the results of it. Most aspects of her botanical labors have been well described by others (for



Plate 1406

Edith Scamman, in the Sierra de Talamanca of Costa Rica, April 1951.

example the Tryons in *Am. Fern J.* 58, pp. 1-4, 1968, who also give a useful 'Bibliography of Edith Scamman'). Yet to the taxa of vascular plants that they mention as named for her should be added at least *Cerastium scammaniae* Polunin (in *Rhodora* 53, p. 227, 1951), which she photographed and studied at my request in two of its few known stations overlooking Bering Straits. For although her chief interest everywhere was in the ferns, Miss Scamman's collecting in the North was far more general. Backing her steadfast enterprise, in spite of her relatively frail form and

eternal womanliness, were an almost tough persistence and the spirit of the frontiersman in which she evidently took after her pioneering, west-wandering father (who was once wounded in a real western hold-up, and participated as a banker in the California gold-rush in the early 1850s). Nevertheless, Edith delighted to relate how a forebear, a Colonel Scamman of nearby Biddeford, Maine, had been court-martialled (and acquitted) for going with his men to Bunker Hill, Maine, when ordered to the Battle of Bunker Hill!

Edith's father being many years older than her mother, she was left to care for the latter on his death and did so to the preclusion of the happiness of marriage which one would have wished for her. Perhaps in unconscious partial compensation, she lavished affection on her friends of all ages and situations and seemed always to revel in their news and correspondence. Yet the brave pioneer spirit had evidently been inherited from her venturesome father, so that after her mother's death, when already approaching her sixties, she began her serious study of plant life and to that end often adventurous travelling, 'tramping the countryside with a joy in living and with none of the fears that most of us who were her friends would have known' (according to the eulogy delivered at the Appleton Chapel, Harvard Yard, by the Reverend Dr. Frederick M. Meek on 4 December 1967). As a result of her inquisitiveness of mind and warmth of spirit she was beloved by children (including my own), and had several Alaskan and Indian babies named Edith after her; moreover to crown her pioneering there were friends who were anxious to see her admitted as the first woman member of that venerable bachelor establishment the New England Botanical Club — which now, only a little too late, has acceded to the inevitable march of time.

Botanically, Miss Scamman's observation and collecting were critical, painstaking, and often valuable — *inter alia* because of the out-of-the-way places which she was able to reach and, often, sojourn in. Notable among these were Eagle Summit in central Alaska and the interior of Costa

Rica where her headquarters in a dive named 'Bar Kentucky' might have been characterized by having 'cockroaches as big as rats and rats as big as cats'. As a result of her personal field activities, Harvard has benefitted particularly by some 5,000 sheets of vascular plants from various parts of Alaska and about 1,400 from Costa Rica representing some 500 species of ferns — almost all of her own collecting. Her botanical publications were few but reliable, and sometimes displayed a Wordsworthian quality that was, however, consistent with scientific accuracy.

Though well educated at Thornton Academy, Saco, and then at Wellesley and Radcliffe Colleges (at which latter she obtained an M.A. in English Literature in 1909), Edith Scamman was at heart a perpetual student, attending courses ranging from Systematic Botany and Ecology to Chinese at Harvard and elsewhere until almost her latest years; and she had an infectious quality of passing on her enthusiasms to a wide range of friends. It was in this course-taking connection that I first got to know her in the middle 1930s in the old Gray Herbarium situated in the erstwhile Harvard Botanical Garden which occupied the corner of Garden and Linnaean Streets, Cambridge. That was a happy place indeed to work — often practically through the night! There we were both devoted (if not wholly devout!) disciples of the late Professor Merritt L. Fernald, another Maine stalwart of undying memories, and I well recall how on one early occasion we made a field trip with his class for some days into northern New Hampshire and Vermont to observe the spring awakening of plant life in that delightful region. The trip was memorable in many ways, not the least of which was the faithfully chugging participation of Miss Scamman's already ancient brown Dodge car — which was still in the barn of her home in Saco, Maine, and even occasionally used, when we occupied her fine family house there some twenty years later. Her frugality was entirely for herself and by her nature: she had considerable property in California as well as in Maine, and to others was generosity personified. This is thought-

fully expressed in a wide range of legacies to friends and institutions.

Intensely religious in her early life, and active for many years on missionary boards, Edith Scamman become more and more convinced of the ultimate values of scientific truth and reasoning as a satisfactory basis for human life as her serious study of plants progressed through its third decade and into its fourth. The last time I went to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to spend some days with her, in May of 1967, this philosophy seemed to prevail, though we did not discuss it specifically. She was already enfeebled, suddenly looking incredibly aged (she had seemed scarcely to change at all in the preceding thirty and more years), but still stubbornly refusing to move from the modest room in which she lived to more secure and comfortable quarters just across the street — affectionately arranged for by friends. And in spite of the setting up of a calling-system by which I would be brought over from Europe if I could be of any help, or at least in time to see her once again, this failed to function before she died in Cambridge on 4 November 1967, less than a month prior to her 85th birthday. It can truly be said, and I know I am reflecting the thoughts of numerous friends in many corners of the earth in saying so with deep feeling, that the world is not the same without Edith Scamman, having lost something rare and uniquely precious with her passing.

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